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National Centre for Student
Equity in Higher Education



Curtin University

WIDENING TERTIARY PARTICIPATION QUEENSLAND

Student Ambassador Investigations

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- Queensland University of Technology (QUT)
- The University of Queensland (UQ)
- University of Southern Queensland (USQ)
- University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), and
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1. Student Ambassador Investigations

1.1 Introduction

The use of enrolled university students as student role models, mentors or ‘ambassadors’ to work with school students has been a common feature of outreach and engagement work undertaken by Queensland’s Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium. This report brings together investigations undertaken with such students (Ambassadors) across five Consortium institutions, focussing on their background, motivation and also how they perceive participation in widening participation programs has impacted on themselves and on the school students they work with.

1.2 Terminology

In this report, the term ‘Student Ambassador’ is used as a convenient term, capturing the different types of student role-models, mentors and ambassadors used in the various Queensland widening participation programs. Student Ambassador is the term used by four of the five universities contributing to this report, while the fifth (Griffith) uses the term ‘Mentor’ for students performing similar roles in their Launch into Life at Logan (LILAL) program. The University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) has also included some responses from their Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) mentors.

The term ‘Student Ambassador’ has been commonly used in the UK for over a decade to refer to enrolled university students undertaking various roles related to delivery of widening participation activities including summer schools, on-campus visits, school workshops and also in mentoring roles. The term continues to be used extensively, both in the UK and Australia, to refer to enrolled students who are engaged to undertake widening participation and/or specific recruitment and marketing activity. For this report, the term Student Ambassador is used to refer to students who are involved in promoting participation in tertiary study generally rather than promoting the specific attributes of participation at their university.

1.3 Background

The Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium, consisting of Queensland’s eight public universities, has collaborated since 2009 in the development and implementation of a suite of activities aimed at improving the tertiary participation of low SES and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders. Consortium partners are:

- CQUniversity Australia (CQU)
- Griffith University (GU)
- James Cook University (JCU)
- Queensland University of Technology (QUT)
- The University of Queensland (UQ)
- University of Southern Queensland (USQ)
- University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), and
- the multi-state Australian Catholic University (ACU).

In 2011, the Consortium was successful in its application for competitive grant funding from the Australian Government’s Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP)¹, which enabled significant scaling-up of coordinated school outreach and Indigenous engagement activities across Queensland. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by each Consortium university and the Queensland Department of Education and Training sets out an agreed philosophy and approach while leaving universities considerable scope to design activities best suited to their context and the needs of their local communities. Activities undertaken by each university were based on available evidence of good practice, considerable practitioner expertise, and what universities were best placed to deliver.

¹ Now known as the Higher Education Participation Programme (HEPP).

The MOU outlined the following four types of school outreach activity that universities would pursue:

1. Providing de-mystification experiences for first-in-family and other non-traditional students.
2. Providing encouragement and inspiration through role models and awards/prizes.
3. Value-adding to learning and achievement especially with discipline specific connections.
4. Providing advice about alternate pathways for admissions and scholarships.

Consortium universities have made use of Student Ambassadors to deliver on all four types of activity.

In order to establish a coordinated approach which maximised impact, eliminated gaps and duplication, and allowed responsiveness to local circumstances and context, each Consortium partner agreed to take responsibility for delivering school outreach activities in a designated local cluster of low SES schools, such that all low-income primary and secondary schools in the state were covered. Based on campus proximity and existing school partnerships, the resulting clusters were of unequal size and complexity, and resource allocation recognised this.

In 2014, widening participation activities reached approximately 545 schools across Queensland and in excess of 70,000 student engagements occurred in the year. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in school and community settings participated in a variety of Indigenous engagement activities, including over 500 secondary school participants in Indigenous mentoring programs.

1.4 Student Ambassador Rationale

Use of enrolled students as student ambassadors, mentors, role-models and presenters of widening participation activities is well established both in the UK and Australia. Evaluation of *Aimhigher* widening participation programs in England found that de-mystification experiences, including mentoring and interaction with undergraduate students, were amongst the most effective programs for changing student beliefs about the possibility of attending university (Sutton Trust 2008). Passy and Morris (2010, p. 7) described the role of ambassadors or Associates as “key” to transforming beliefs about participation in higher education. In Australia, Gale et al. (2010) identified the use of student mentors or role models as prevalent in school interventions and an effective strategy for imparting information and supporting attainment. This was particularly so where students lacked role models and support amongst their families and peers for tertiary aspirations. Student Ambassadors, especially those who have come from similar backgrounds to the younger students they are working with, are regarded as possessing “hot” knowledge (Gartland and Paczuska 2007, cited in Ylonen, 2010, p. 98) capable of breaking down myths and misconceptions related to tertiary study. Ambassadors as story-tellers, using narratives of their own journeys to tertiary study, was an intentional strategy adopted by the Queensland Consortium for de-mystification and de-bunking myths. In the words of Austin and Hatt (2005, p. 4), “the message is particularly powerful because it is coming from messengers who are talking from their own lived experience.”

1.5 Ambassador Roles

The roles undertaken by ambassadors in the various Widening Tertiary Participation programs include acting as student guides or team leaders during on-campus experience days and residential camps; leading or contributing to on-campus and in school workshops and presentations; providing content expertise and guidance in discipline-specific taster and achievement activities; participating in community and school events; tutoring students and assisting in homework centres; providing information about university access, scholarships, financial support, and student life; and one-on-one or small group mentoring. In all these roles, the Student Ambassador is able to provide first-hand information on their own life journey and participation in higher education and answer questions from school students in mostly informal ways.

1.6 Evaluation

While each Consortium university has undertaken its own data collection focused particularly on evaluation of individual programs, the Consortium agreed to collaborate on three joint evaluation elements:

1. Data tracking and analysis of Year 12 completions, tertiary applications and enrolments to determine if any early impacts were evident in targeted schools.
2. Collecting survey responses from students attending on-campus experience days to the question, "I believe it is possible for me to go to university."
3. Undertaking investigations with Student Ambassadors focused particularly on the experience of the Student Ambassadors and also their perceptions of the impact of widening participation programs on the school students they work with.

These three evaluation elements are based on common program activities and what was considered practically achievable given the differences in program design and implementation across universities.

The decision to include investigations of Student Ambassadors was based on the fact that this was a common element across all school outreach programs. However, the different ways they were employed, the different roles undertaken in each university, and the pre-existence of different evaluation instruments, meant that rather than using a common instrument, each university would undertake its own investigation with the results to be shared and common themes to be drawn out in a synthesis report. While all universities made use of Student Ambassadors or mentors in their programs, only data from five institutions (GU, JCU, QUT, UQ and USC) were available for inclusion in this report and in some cases do not cover all ambassador activity in these institutions. The report is not intended to focus on the efficacy of the Widening Participation program itself, or on the impact of Ambassador interactions on school students' awareness, aspiration and achievement. Rather, it seeks to add to our understanding of the impact undertaking such a role has on the Ambassador. To a lesser extent, their perception of the impact their role has on the school students participating in widening participation programs contributes to the evidence base on the effectiveness of widening participation programs overall.

2. Scope of the Report

This report is focused on the experiences of the Student Ambassadors involved in outreach programs to schools undertaken by the Queensland Consortium universities. It considers how the program has benefitted the Ambassadors, and where there might be potential to improve the way the programs are undertaken.

While each member university's outreach was based on the same core understandings, research and goals, the details of the programs varied, as did the survey instruments used and the reports produced, as each university adapted to the needs of the schools and students within their designated regions. James Cook University had a catchment area which covered the large distances and Indigenous communities of North and Far North Queensland. The University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland University of Technology, The University of Queensland, and Griffith University dealt with the inner regional and outer urban areas of the North Coast, Metropolitan, and South East regions, along with the significant diversity associated with them.

In order to capture both the commonalities and differences of the Consortium's Student Ambassador programs, the Social Ecological Model has been used as a framework to structure this synthesis. This model is designed as a lens through which to evaluate social collaboration and partnerships, particularly those of HEPPP funded partnerships aimed at building aspiration and widening participation in higher education. The focus of this model is on not only enabling evaluation of programs at a variety of levels of engagement – from the individuals to institutions – but also on enabling an holistic approach to reviewing and changing current practice.

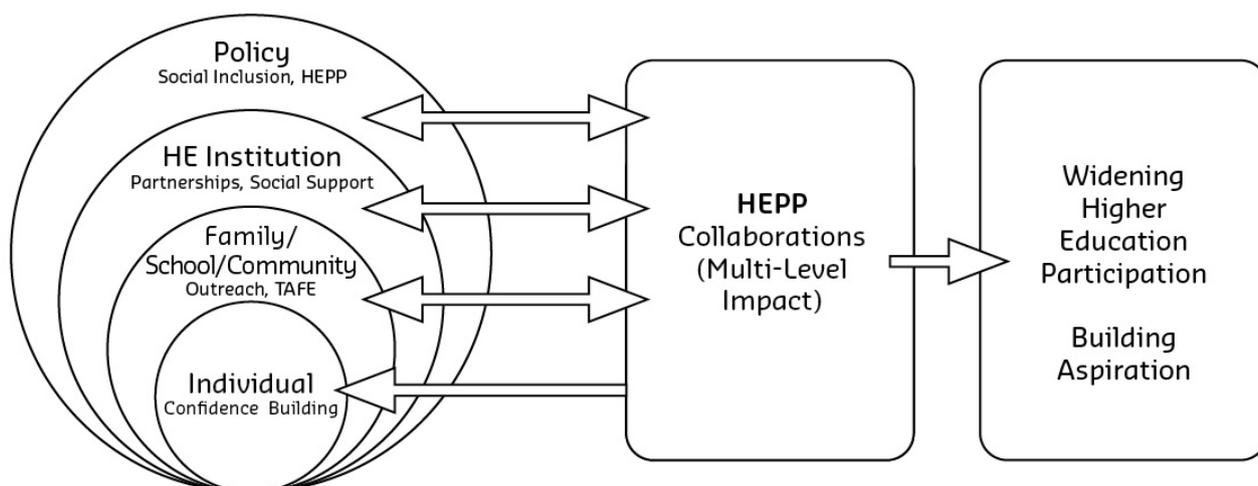


Figure 1: Social Ecological Model of HEPPP Collaboration on Widening Participation (Costello and Trinidad, 2015, p.4-5).

What is not covered in this report is a consideration of the perceptions of the school students the Ambassadors engage with, and the programs' effects on progression to higher education. For an assessment on the effectiveness of the Queensland Consortium's School Outreach Project in terms of student progression, see Koshy and Islam's 2015 report, *An Evaluation of Widening Tertiary Participation Queensland*. Overall, Koshy and Islam found that the program was successful in achieving its goal of widening participation in higher education. Further, in 2013 the Consortium collectively attained the Rudd-Gillard government's target of 20% of enrolments being taken up by students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (p. 27), with a higher rate of enrolments at Consortium universities for students from schools involved in the Consortium's programs (p. 28).

The collected data considered in this synthesis is largely from the surveys given to Student Ambassadors themselves. As these surveys are not identically worded, or given at the same point in their experiences as Ambassadors, a narrative approach is taken in order to compare and contrast the information and statistics which have been generated from their responses.

The report is structured using the circles of influence identified in the Social Ecological Model (Fig. 1), beginning with an examination of the Ambassadors, moving on to family/school/community, and then considering the Consortium universities.

The next section of the report considers the Ambassadors' themselves – their motivations for taking part in the program, perceptions of satisfaction, and the capabilities they have developed over the course of the program.

In section four, family, school, and community are touched on in terms of how the program bridges gaps within and between communities and individuals. In particular, the focus is on the use of a narrative approach to outreach and myth-busting, the Ambassadors' perceptions of their impact, and the enriching of school cultures and fostering of conversations about higher education within school communities.

Institutional practices of the Consortium of universities are considered in section five, in relation to the recruitment and training of the Ambassadors, and the Ambassadors' satisfaction with these practices.

The policy implications of these different aspects of the program are considered holistically, within the relevant sections of the report, and drawn together in the conclusion in section six. Recommendations are also made regarding streamlining evaluation and improving aspects of the program.

3. Individual Factors – The Student Ambassadors

The Consortium’s Student Ambassadors were motivated to join the different programs for a variety of reasons, ranging from social justice ideals to skills development and paid employment. The satisfaction experienced by the Ambassadors after contact with students shows a similar range in attitudes, with social justice ideals and a sense of community commonly featuring in responses, alongside an appreciation for the skills developed through engagement with the program. These perceived outcomes of their involvement with the program were mapped to graduate outcomes by most of the Consortium universities.

Overall, the Student Ambassador program is very well received by the Ambassadors, on a variety of different levels.

3.1 Motivation

Students were motivated to take part in the Ambassador program for a variety of overlapping reasons. Broadly speaking, there were three main motivators:

1. giving to others
2. personal gain (eg. skills and employment), and
3. promoting education to others, particularly in their discipline (QUT, 2013, p. 7).

Other programs show similar motivations, although the weightings vary for how important students find these factors. Taylor (2008, cited in Ylonen, 2010, p. 98) found that students commonly gave both altruistic and practical reasons for wanting to take part in student ambassador programs. Ylonen (2012, p. 806) found that almost all of the *Aimhigher* students she surveyed were motivated by a perception that the program would make them more employable; however, they also reported they enjoyed helping people. Similarly, Roger and Burgess (2010, p. 38) found that students were motivated by gaining employment experience, personal development, and financial reward, but that helping young people progress to higher education was also a reason for some.

All three of these reasons were important for the Consortium Student Ambassadors, although their level of importance differed from university to university.

Giving to Others

Several of the most common motivations expressed by Queensland Student Ambassadors related to giving, as can be seen in Table 1. “To contribute to university and/or the wider community” was the top motivation at QUT, while “To positively contribute to the lives of equity background students” was most significant at the other universities.

In open responses, a theme of wanting to give back to others was expressed in two main forms across all the Ambassador cohorts:

1. giving back to the community the student belonged to, often linked to a self-identified background of disadvantage, and
2. giving back specifically via an outreach program, because the student had been inspired by such a program themselves.

Queensland University of Technology summarised responses to an open question in exactly this way. Over a third of students (35%) indicated they “Desire to ‘give back’ because I come from a low-income, Indigenous, first-in-family or rural background.” Another 14% indicated they “Desire to ‘give back’ because ambassadors encouraged me when I was in school” (QUT, 2013, p. 17).

Ambassadors from the other universities expressed similar motivations:

“My siblings had been Uni-Reach Mentors and I wanted to also give back to a program that has made me to feel more welcomed into university. It is also an opportunity to gain many career-related skills.” (GU, 2014c, p. 8)

“I was motivated to become a mentor so I could influence upcoming students in the same way the past Uni-Reach Mentors did for me. Another reason was to give back to the community I grew up in.” (GU, 2014c, p. 9)

“I wanted to become a Student Ambassador as I saw (and still do see) it as valuable employment opportunity for developing team skills, friendships and sharing experiences related to life, work and uni. I enjoy working with kids as I still see myself a young child at heart. Student Ambassadors really is an opportunity to give back to the community. I loved my first time working as an ambassador, earning respect and adoration of the students we worked with by sharing our experiences and our advice.” (JCU, 2014b)

“1. Motivation to give back to the university and prospective students. 2. Motivation to help out students who have barriers preventing them from accessing university education. 3. Wanted to meet like-minded people. 4. Professional development – facilitation skills, etc.” (UQ, 2013)

“Being Aboriginal myself, I didn’t have access to programs like AIME. Taking part in it means that I am contributing to closing the gap and giving back into the community and showing my respect and determination to do my part.” (USC, 2014)²

Personal Gain

The interplay of motivations surrounding paid employment and personal gain is complex and expressed in many different ways by the Ambassadors, with some students more up-front about the need for remuneration, and others highlighting other aspects of the job.

Chilosi et al. (2008) considered the impact of part-time work on university study in the U.K., and in particular how it can exacerbate inequality in educational achievement experienced by those students with a background of social disadvantage. However, they also point out that not all part-time work has a detrimental effect on a student’s education, depending on how well it fits in with student workload. Student Ambassador roles can have positive outcomes for the student in terms of fostering a sense of belonging at university, increased student confidence, and skills development, in addition to providing much needed income (Chilosi et al., 2008, p. 2).

The Queensland Consortium universities developed their Ambassador programs with these issues in mind, designing the roles so that they have flexible hours which complement the students’ studies. In some cases, the programs also work in collaboration with equity programs. The Explore Uni program run by QUT, for instance, recruits student Ambassadors via the ATAR low-income student bonus scheme.

Table 1 indicates that some students were strongly motivated by the income provided by the Ambassador role, especially those from James Cook University. However, the complexity of motives surrounding the need for paid employment or other types of personal gain (such as from work experience) became more apparent in open questions. Students tended to include these practical drivers in lists of other motivations, often with more altruistic motives being given a higher place.

² Minor punctuation, spelling, and typographical errors have been corrected in all student responses.

“There are many reasons that motivated me to become a student ambassador at QUT. (1) Engaging with students from diverse backgrounds is the most fantastic experience, I didn’t want to miss out. (2) Becoming knowledgeable about the social justice aims of widening participation of disadvantaged students to tertiary study is very interesting too. (3) I wanted to keep developing my communication skills. (4) Learn about my university. (5) Gain paid, flexible work as a casual staff member. (6) Enjoy the benefits of being a QUT employee and get discount on the books from QUT’s bookshop. (7) Promote something I’m really passionate about. (8) Developing relationships with other QUT staff, academics and Explore Uni Ambassadors and improving my confidence and public speaking skills. These all above are the main reasons that motivated me to become a Student Ambassador at QUT.” (QUT, 2012)

“I was really in need of part-time employment but I was extremely passionate about tertiary education and believed strongly in the scholarships program which QUT had to offer. I wanted to help students as much as the ambassadors helped me.” (QUT, 2012)

“I applied as a student ambassador for two reasons. One, because I recognise the need for graduates to have experience and show that they have participated in a wide range of activities to be employable. Two, because I am very passionate about youth empowerment, especially towards tertiary education, or education of any kind.” (JCU, 2014a)

“Thought it sounded like a wonderful job opportunity to get paid to help others and share my experiences in a way that could benefit them... and thought I would gain useful skills and experience.” (UQ, 2013b)

“Proud of USC and required income for budget.” (USC, 2014)

Promoting Education

The motivation to promote education was expressed in a variety of ways, ranging from wanting to share a love of the discipline, to a more general sense of wanting to motivate people to study, but perhaps it is most pithily expressed by this Griffith student (GU, 2014):

“The students need to know that university isn’t just for rich people, it is for everyone and it is a great opportunity to achieve what you want in life.”

Interestingly, within the Consortium program there is some evidence of a correlation between a Student Ambassador’s experience of an equity background, especially regional and remote or Indigenous communities, and their motivations for joining the program in order to promote education to those from similar backgrounds. In this regard, the motivation to “give back” is linked to the desire to promote higher education.

In 2012, QUT specifically looked at this issue and found that while there was a lot of commonality in motivations across their Ambassador cohort, there were also some key differences. The most frequently cited reasons for becoming an Ambassador from equity background respondents were:

- coming from a LSES background and/or gaining inspiration from Ambassadors as a school student (24%), and
- because of a desire to encourage/inspire school students (22%).

In contrast, non-equity background respondents’ most frequently cited reasons were:

- to gain experience, enhance skills and/or improve future employment prospects (24%), and
- a desire to contribute to QUT and/or wider society (24%) (QUT, 2012, p.6).

Similarly in 2013, students with an equity background were most commonly motivated in order to “contribute to QUT and/or the wider community” (74% c.f. non-equity; 64%), while those from non-equity background again chose skills development and experience as the top reason (69% c.f. equity; 64%) (QUT, 2013, p.11). Overall, for both groups of students, contributing to the community was the most common motivator.

The aggregate table below (Table 1) shows a similar pattern. The comparative data are taken from the responses to open questions about motivation, asked by UQ, JCU, and USC, and coded to best fit QUT’s categories. Griffith’s LILAL program had no data in a form which could be compared, but students expressed similar desires to “give back” and help others go to university, as can be seen in the quote at the start of this section.

To create the aggregate table, the QUT survey results were used as a foundation, with some slight modifications made to remove the QUT-specific aspects. The list of motivators is drawn from multiple-choice options in the 2013 QUT survey, which QUT developed based on responses to their first Student Ambassador survey in 2012. Students could choose up to five answers from this list of possible motivators.

The table represents all the matches in a student’s open-form answer from the surveys by UQ, JCU, and USC, whether the student gave just one motivator or several. The open questions the Ambassadors responded to were:

- Please tell us what motivated you to become a Student Ambassador. (UQ, 2013)
- Why did you want to become a Student Ambassador? (JCU, 2014b)
- Motivational Factors: Please describe why you applied to be a Student Ambassador (JCU, 2014a – Townsville and Cairns)
- Please tell us, in your own words, what motivated you to take on this role? (USC, 2014)

The Ambassadors from UQ and USC most often indicated a desire “To positively contribute to the lives of equity background students” as a motivator. A majority of the Ambassadors from these two universities identified as having experienced a background associated with some kind of social disadvantage (Tables 9 and 11), however the small number of Ambassadors in these two programs makes it difficult to confirm a direct correlation.

In the two data sets from James Cook University, which is the most remote of the four, a notable difference can be seen between the two cohorts. Those from the main group of Ambassadors, 9.5% of whom were Indigenous, expressed that they wanted “To gain skills and experience, e.g. public speaking, leadership or working with school students” more often than those from Townsville and Cairns Camp Ambassadors. The Townsville and Cairns Student Ambassadors, 38% of whom were Indigenous, more often expressed the motivation “To positively contribute to the lives of equity background students.”

This is particularly interesting in light of Ware’s (2013) review of mentoring programs for Indigenous youth, which found that mentoring fits particularly well into Indigenous teaching and learning styles (p. 1). The way in which such mentoring is implemented for Indigenous students is crucial in determining its success; while single-intervention mentoring can achieve positive results, Ware found that integration into longer-term programs leads to greater positive change, especially for youths at risk (p. 1). This is a potential avenue for expansion within the Consortium program.

Motivation to become a Student Ambassador, in percentages	QUT, 2013 (N=111)	UQ, 2013 (N=28)	James Cook, 2014 (N=21)	James Cook, Townsville & Cairns 2014 (N=65)	USC, 2014 (N=37)
To contribute to university and/or the wider community	70	14	38	23	32
To gain skills and experience e.g. public speaking, leadership or working with school students	66	25	67	38	40
To help school students gain awareness of my discipline and/or discipline-related career options	58	4	10	14	
To positively contribute to the lives of equity background students	50	61	38	46	43
To enhance my graduate employment prospects/will look good on my CV	49	4		2	
Flexible hours fit study commitments	44	7	14	3	
Talk to students and answer questions/share transition experiences and/or discipline knowledge	38	32	38	43	5
The money/well paid role	32	14	62	3	5
Work is more interesting than other part-time job options	26	14	5	6	5
Putting theory into practice/gaining practical experience	26		10	2	3
Encouraged to apply by program staff member	23	14		2	
Opportunity to make new friends	20	14	24	20	5
Heard about the role from other ambassadors	12			3	
Part of coursework requirements	1				3

Table 1: A summary of the motivations of Student Ambassadors, from multiple choice or open answer questions (highest score is shaded).

3.2 Ambassador Satisfaction

The satisfaction expressed by Ambassadors was high across all five Consortium universities. Engagement with the school students was a notable theme, along with feeling more connected to the university, friends and the wider community, and development of skills. This focus on the affective elements of the program, in addition to the practical, is consistent with the literature. The work of Eby et al. (2006, p. 424) on mentoring in the workplace found that mentors derived significant satisfaction from helping people, and gaining recognition and respect from others. They further make the point that these benefits are consistent with research on the positive effects of the development of social capital on career success (p. 426). Hoover (2004, cited in Arnold, 2012, p. 22) found that engagement with collegiate student organisations is associated more generally with both student retention and satisfaction.

Building this capacity for helping others, gaining recognition, and developing self-respect is part of the Consortium's strategy, as articulated by QUT:

“Following selection, ambassadors [...] go through a formal training process that includes narrative-style public speaking skills; running workshops; and behaviour management. The [Explore Uni] team creates a positive team culture and trusting environment whereby ambassadors are comfortable talking about barriers they experienced on their pathway to university. This reinforces ambassadors' pride in having made it to university 'against the odds' – positioning them as pioneers, not victims.” (QUT, 2013, p. 4)

While not all Ambassadors come from disadvantaged backgrounds, as was the case with QUT's Explore Uni program, Ambassador satisfaction generally reflects this inclusive and supportive approach used across the Consortium, as expressed in response to questions about how they felt they had benefitted from involvement with the program.

For instance, all 36 of the Ambassadors working with The University of Queensland reported substantial gains when asked, “In your own words, what you have gained from being a Student Ambassador?” Skills, perspectives, confidence, and a sense of community were common themes.

“I have gained a lot. This job has been a great source of knowledge and I have gained heaps of skills! I have gained a greater knowledge of students that struggle in rough schools. I feel very fortunate to have come from a good school, and I have loved helping all the kids who don't have as much opportunity as I had. I have also loved meeting other ambassadors who are very high achievers and have encouraged me to do better at my studies. Also I have gained a lot of practical skills like, speaking, listening and facilitation. It's been a great job and I have loved it.”

“I have gained skills that I wouldn't have gained if I hadn't been a student ambassador. I have developed my communication skills and now feel comfortable communicating with a diverse range of people. I have developed my facilitation and presentation skills, and also learnt and reinforced how to set proper goals, and to achieve them. I also feel as though I have gained confidence in this role, and have been able to apply this confidence to my everyday life.”

“It has really given me perspective on some of the challenges faced by young people in such nearby communities in terms of education and tertiary aspirations. For me, going to uni was just something that my family did – it was expected – so I've really found it a great experience being able to try and inspire kids who never thought of it as an option. I've learnt how to communicate better and step into a leadership role within a small group.” (UQ, 2014)

In contrast, of the 36 Ambassadors working with the University of the Sunshine Coast, one had a negative response, and eight Ambassadors didn't respond at all to the prompt, “How has your involvement in this role impacted on YOU in general?” The negative response is concerned with training and support, which is explored in more detail later in the report. While the eight non-responses to this question are somewhat unusual, the 27 positive responses covered a similar mix of skills development and helping others.

“I feel it has given me more confidence and I now understand what is available at the uni and all the options available for students and myself. It has given me the opportunity to promote USC, university life and discuss my experiences with others.”

“This role is so important to me and I know that I am making a positive impact on people's lives, especially students that have low self-esteem and confidence in their academic abilities. It has made me feel proud, confident, caring and important.”

“It has reinforced my faith in my own ability to build a good rapport with teenagers.” (USC, 2014)

Mentors working with Griffith University also expressed satisfaction with the program – 99% said they enjoyed it, and 98% were interested in returning; the comments available in the report show a similar set of themes to those which emerged at the other universities.

“I felt that I gained leadership skills, responsibilities and being a part of the wider community in informing them about future options.”

“I gained a deeper appreciation for the challenges these students face and that organisation is the key to successful programs. The seeds planted now will [pay] off in the future, invest in kids early.” (GU, 2014b, p. 4)

All Ambassadors working with James Cook University responded positively to the program, offering a range of responses to the question, “What impact (if any) has the Student Ambassador program had on you personally?” Once again, skills, confidence, and a sense of community were common themes.

“I feel so rewarded. I really feel like I have helped some young people in a very small way. I have also really really enjoyed making friends with the other Ambassadors – in fact this has been really wonderful – I’ve made some strong friends through this program. I feel like I really belong at Uni and I’m part of a little family. This would definitely have impact on studies I’m sure. I’m really going to miss working with the Ambassadors – they are great friends.”

“The Ambassador program has done two great things for me. One networking, I have met so many other motivated students as a result of this program – the people who want to make a difference in the world and on our campus. Also networking with school staff has been of great benefit too. The other main benefit is learning the aspirations of school students, what inspires them, what they want to learn and what they want to change.”

“I believe being part of the Student Ambassadors has helped me not only develop some lifelong friendships, but taught me a lot about other degrees; improved my faith in my path choices and excitement for my future. I feel honoured that I have the opportunity to inspire and advise young people; and improved motivation in my own study pursuits as well as my focus on the importance of keeping balance in my life (i.e. social, hobbies, work and study).” (JCU, 2014b, p. 9-10)

QUT had similarly high satisfaction indicators, although they took a different approach, asking which aspects of the Ambassador experience were the most satisfying. “Contributing to QUT and/or the wider community” and “Positively contributing to the lives of low-income background students” were the two most popular choices, with 77% and 69% of respondents agreeing with them (QUT, 2013, p. 16).

QUT asked an additional question in their 2013 survey, asking why Ambassadors found these aspects so satisfying. Eighty-five percent responded that it was “Satisfying to encourage students to follow their dreams/see students become inspired about future study” (QUT, 2013, p. 17).

Skills, confidence, and a sense of community were commonly expressed themes in QUT's open question, with an additional focus on sharing and improving discipline knowledge.

“My position as a student ambassador has meant that I have become more engaged in the university because 1. I have a group of like-minded individuals who have shared their experiences and supported me in my endeavours and 2. I am more aware of opportunities that the university offers because of the training undertaken as a part of various student ambassador programs. There are also the obvious factors such as practising public speaking skills which has meant that I am more confident to speak up in class and also more confident when it comes to assessable presentations. I also believe that the program has an underlying “family” support factor, where you feel encouraged and supported to continue through your studies. You know that people will care if you drop out or if you are struggling and that there is always someone there to help you with overcoming any obstacles you may face, whether emotional, financial or academic. Through my role as a student ambassador I have become aware and gained other employment within the university which matches a passion and obligation I feel to help support others in their transition from high school to university, with my economic need.”

“Reinforcing the original reason I went into my area of study. Teaching students about concepts that I was once passionate about and having their enthusiasm reinvigorate that passion.”

“Has improved my clinical skills as well as put valuable theoretical knowledge learnt into practice. In addition, you get to see numerous different cases out at the schools and Explore Uni programs which you wouldn't normally see in the clinic.” (QUT, 2013)

3.3 Graduate Attributes

While the Student Ambassador program's mandated purpose is as an outreach exercise, it is also designed to enhance the Student Ambassadors' skills, knowledge and career opportunities. James Cook University's report expresses this philosophy best:

“The program also supports the development of personal qualities such as public speaking, working as part of a team, leadership, time management and organisational skills. This program also supports the students to develop their own ability to easily adapt and effectively engage with culturally and socially diverse groups of people including school students of all ages, school staff, parents and community members and organisations.” (JCU, 2014b, p. 2)

This is in keeping with the outcomes reported in the literature. Ylonen's (2012) research into the *Aimhigher* student ambassador program discussed the many potential benefits to the ambassadors taking part, particularly paid employment, development of transferrable skills, increased confidence, and a sense of personal reward (p. 801), all of which the ambassadors perceive as increasing their employability (p. 802). Similar findings are reported by Arnold (2012), for a discipline-specific ambassador program.

Beltman and Schaeben (2012) investigated peer mentoring in university-wide transition programs, which have much in common with Student Ambassador programs. They categorised the benefits of such programs into four groups: altruistic, cognitive, social and personal growth (p. 33). Much of the literature into first-year university peer-to-peer mentoring reports similar types of outcomes for the mentors (see Arco-Tirado, Fernández-Martín and Fernández-Balboa, 2011; Collings, Swanson and Watkins, 2014; Cornelius and Wood, 2012; Hall and Jaugietis 2011; Hryciw et al., 2013).

Most of the Consortium members have mapped the potential development of these kinds of skills, capacities and understandings within the Ambassador program to the graduate attributes of the university. The surveys ask questions related to how students perceive their professional development after having taken part in the program. Although each university has slightly different graduate attributes, they commonly include:

- discipline knowledge and skills
- communication and team work
- critical thinking and problem solving
- social responsibility and community engagement
- cultural competence and ethics, and
- self-confidence and leadership.

While the graduate attributes formalised by the Consortium universities map reasonably closely to each other, the survey questions used to track them vary considerably. Four of the universities – Griffith University, The University of Queensland, James Cook University, and Queensland University of Technology – asked Likert scale questions related to graduate attributes, with some overlap in the questions themselves. The University of the Sunshine Coast asked two open questions which covered similar ground.

Queensland University of Technology's graduate attributes include:

- knowledge and skills pertinent to a particular discipline or professional area
- critical, creative and analytical thinking, and effective problem-solving
- effective communication in a variety of contexts and modes
- the capacity for life-long learning
- the ability to work independently and collaboratively
- social and ethical responsibility and an understanding of Indigenous and international perspectives, and
- characteristics of self-reliance and leadership.

The Ambassadors' responses (Table 2) show that there is strong agreement with the development of specific skills, such as oral communication, and with general attributes such as confidence. More complex and time-consuming capabilities, which are less easily tracked in terms of concrete performance measures, showed higher uncertainty and negative responses. For instance, "Made me more aware/appreciative of Indigenous perspectives," was the least agreed with, although still with a majority of positive responses.

Statements relating to QUT's graduate capabilities	Explore Uni equity ambassadors (N=52)			Discipline-based ambassadors (N=63)			All respondents (N=111)		
	SA/A	NS	D/SD	SA/A	NS	D/SD	SA/A	NS	D/SD
Overall, acting as a WP ambassador or volunteer has positively enhanced my skills and/or knowledge	99	2	-	99	2	-	96	4	-
Being a Student Ambassador or volunteer has:									
Helped me develop my oral communication skills	92	2	4	95	2	2	92	3	4
Enhanced my personal confidence about my abilities	88	6	6	92	6	2	89	7	4
Enhanced my ability to work as a productive team member	90	4	4	91	6	3	88	7	4
Made me feel more involved in the wider community	87	12	2	88	10	2	88	9	3
Given me greater insight into the challenges facing low income communities	85	8	6	84	8	8	84	9	6
Made me more aware of the importance of social responsibility	87	4	6	81	6	10	83	8	5
Enhanced my leadership skills	88	6	4	87	10	-	83	11	4
Made me more aware of the importance of cross-cultural communication	84	10	4	76	10	11	78	12	7
Helped develop my problem-solving or critical thinking abilities	75	19	-	78	11	5	77	15	4
Made me more aware/appreciative of Indigenous perspectives	69	17	10	56	19	17	67	17	11

Table 2: QUT's Ambassadors' perceptions of their development of graduate attributes 2013, in percentages.

Griffith University's graduate attributes include:

- knowledgeable and skilled in their disciplines
- effective communicators and team members
- innovative and creative, with critical judgement
- socially responsible and engaged in their communities, and
- competent in culturally diverse and international environments.

A similar pattern can be seen in Griffith's mentors. While agreement is high for all categories, the most uncertainty is shown with the most complex capability: "Gave me a greater insight into the challenges facing the Logan/Inala communities."

Statements	Overall Average (2011-2013; N = 115 mentors)	Percentage of Mentors working with Logan Schools Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed (Averaged 2011 to 2013; N = 104 mentors)	Percentage of Mentors working with Inala Schools Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed (2013; N = 11 mentors)
Made me feel more involved in the wider community	99.5	99	100
Helped me understand the importance of communicating and working effectively with others	98	96	100
Helped me appreciate my social and civic responsibilities	98.5	97	100
Made me more aware of the importance of intercultural competence	96	92	100
Helped me apply the knowledge I have gained during my studies to a real-life situation	94.5	89	100
Gave me a greater insight into the challenges facing the Logan/Inala communities	92.5	85	100

Table 3: Griffith University's Launch into Life Mentors' perceptions of their development of graduate attributes.

The University of Queensland's graduate attributes include:

- in-depth knowledge and skills in the field of study
- effective communication
- independence and creativity
- critical judgement, and
- ethical and social understanding.

UQ's Ambassadors similarly perceived that they had developed many skills and capabilities during the program. Statements related to gaining an insight into the challenges facing low income communities, and applying discipline knowledge to real life situations were the only capabilities to rate lower than 90% in agreement. "Being a Student Ambassador has helped me apply skills and knowledge from my discipline to real-life situations," was the statement with the lowest level of agreement. This continues the trend of the more complex capabilities being the ones students feel least confidence in, although there is still considerable agreement that these skills are being developed through the program.

Statements	Overall Average (2013-2014; N = 66)	Percentage of Ambassadors Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed (2013; N = 30)	Percentage of Ambassadors Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed (2014; N = 36)
Being a Student Ambassador has made me feel more involved in the wider community.	100	100	100
Being a Student Ambassador has helped me develop my oral communication skills.	98	96.1	100
Being a Student Ambassador has enhanced my ability to work as a productive team member and/or leader.	100	100	100
Being a Student Ambassador has made me more aware of my social responsibilities.	95.8	100	91.6
Being a Student Ambassador has helped develop my ability to take initiative.	91	88.5	94
Being a Student Ambassador has made me more aware of the importance of cross-cultural communication.	91.9	92.3	91.6
Being a Student Ambassador has helped me apply skills and knowledge from my discipline to real-life situations.	77.3	77	77.7
Being a Student Ambassador has given me greater insight into the challenges facing low income communities.	88.1	84.6	91.6

Table 4: The University of Queensland's Ambassadors' perceptions of their development of graduate attributes.

James Cook University's graduate attributes include:

- embrace diversity and be responsive to genuine and sustainable reconciliation in the communities of the tropics to which JCU belongs
- develop the personal and professional capabilities to manage career and work life effectively, and
- actively contribute to the communities of the tropics.

JCU's approach was narrower in scope, but picks up on a similar theme to UQ. While overall perceptions of skills development were very positive, there seems to be a gap between students' involvement with the program and how they relate the experiences gained to their studies. "Being involved in the student ambassador program motivates me to do well in my studies," is the statement with least agreement. It is not the same as UQ's statement, "Being a Student Ambassador has helped me apply skills and knowledge from my discipline to real-life situations," but there's a possible commonality – an underlying unease in how formal education maps to practice.

Statements	Overall Average (2014; N = 37)	Percentage of Ambassadors Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed (2014; N = 20)	Percentage of Ambassadors Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed (2014; N = 17)
Being involved in the student ambassador program motivates me to participate in wider university activities.	96.9	100	93.8
I believe that being a student ambassador improves my employability and personal skills.	100	100	100
Being involved in the student ambassador program motivates me to do well in my studies.	85.4	89.5	81.3

Table 5: James Cook University's Ambassadors' perceptions of their development of graduate attributes post-camp.

The University of the Sunshine Coast's graduate attributes include:

- creative and critical thinking, generating original ideas and concepts, and appreciating innovation and entrepreneurship
- empowered, having both the capacity and confidence to pursue the attainment of full potential
- engaged, contributing positively to diverse communities through service and leadership
- ethical, acting with integrity in intellectual, professional and community pursuits
- knowledgeable, building disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge through a scholarly approach incorporating global and regional perspectives
- sustainability-focused, responding to ecological, social and economic imperatives, and
- generic skills, communication, collaboration, problem solving, organisation, applying technologies, information literacy.

While the other universities offered Likert scale questions to assess how Ambassadors perceived the development of graduate attributes, USC asked two open questions:

1. "How has your involvement in this role impacted on YOU in general?" and
2. "Specifically, does the role seem to have impacted YOU in terms of your personal or employability skills, or your academic skills or academic motivation?"

These open responses have been mapped to simplified Graduate Attributes, in keeping with the approach of the other universities. The most interesting feature of these responses is the strong focus on confidence and taking the initiative, which was identified by a majority of Ambassadors, and also highly valued.

Statements	Percentage of Ambassadors Who Gave a Similar Answer (2014; N = 37)
Confidence, initiative and creativity.	51
Connection/involvement with the wider community.	40
Communication skills.	18
More aware of the importance of cross-cultural communication.	8
Applying discipline knowledge and skills to real-life situations.	8
Greater insight into the challenges resulting from social disadvantage.	14
More aware of my social and ethical responsibilities.	14
Working with others.	32

Table 6: The University of the Sunshine Coast's Ambassadors' perceptions of their development of graduate attributes, from open questions.

4. Family/School/Community

There is evidence that civic engagement benefits not only the community, but the individuals participating, by improving their strengths and capacities emotionally, cognitively and physically (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2014, p.31). In the previous section of the report, these kinds of effects can be seen in terms of Ambassadors developing graduate attributes while undertaking the program.

However, the converse is also true. Student Ambassador programs can be seen as a sum good to the Ambassadors' home universities and the schools and school students they engage with, and the wider communities their influence ripples out into, just as with other forms of civic engagement. One example of this is the ways Ambassadors can challenge students' entrenched notions about race or class, and how those things map to careers and educational possibilities.

4.1 Narratives: Bridging the Gaps

“Going [to LILAL Careers Event] has changed my life. Now I have seen a university and met people who go there, I know I want to do it! Doing well at school will help me get there.” (Primary school student, GU, 2014b)

Because Student Ambassadors exist in a special category – not quite teacher, yet more expert than school students – they are in a unique position to bridge gaps between institutions and individuals within those institutions. Gartland and Paczuska (2007, cited in Ylonen, 2010, p. 98) suggest that Ambassadors can become “‘hot’ sources” of information, in much the same way that trusted family members often are for those with a family tradition of attending university.

Enabling those kinds of moments of informal and meaningful personal connection is one of the challenges of formal mentoring programs. In fact, formal contexts can hinder such engagement, because they tend to highlight differences between participants rather than commonalities (Gartland, 2014, p. 1). This is why many mentoring programs have a central activity, such as a camp or game, rather than a standard classroom situation. It puts all participants into a less formal situation, in which friendly conversation and teamwork are the focus.

Another approach is to harness the informality of personal narratives which come from ambassadors' own authentic lived experiences. Such narratives are particularly powerful, as they can help break down stereotypes and forge a sense of familiarity and recognition with school students (Austin and Hatt, 2005, p. 4). This is confirmed by research in other contexts; for instance, Slater et al. (2003, p. 255) found that conversational and testimonial formats tend to be perceived as more believable than more formal styles of giving information, but only when the narrator is seen as someone to be identified with. This approach can also be particularly beneficial to some First Nation students, as it is compatible with Indigenous ways of knowing (Ware 2013, p. 1)

One of the key approaches used by the Consortium's programs is to leverage Ambassadors' personal narratives in order to counter common misconceptions about higher education. In particular: it's too expensive, university students need to be geniuses, it's too theoretical, it's too hard to decide, and “people like me don't go to university” (QUT, 2013, p. 1). QUT's Explore Uni program illustrates this approach, as it designed “its on-campus experiences to focus on debunking these ideas in student-friendly formats including student ambassadors from similar backgrounds sharing their journeys to higher education” (QUT, 2013, p. 1).

Matching Ambassadors and students, as is done in many of the Consortium programs, requires carefully considered criteria. The *Evaluation of the NSW Youth Mentoring Program* found that:

“Purposive matching that focuses on the special interests of mentors and mentees, such as career aspirations, is of greatest value. Matching by demographic characteristics, such as gender, race or ethnicity is not a reliable predictor of effective relationships.” (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2014, p. 8)

Background matching on demographic grounds may be more beneficial for Indigenous Australian students than those from other backgrounds, although more research is needed (Ware, 2013, p. 13).

While many of the Consortium programs do use demographic matching, there are refinements to ensure that Ambassadors and school students have other commonalities in order to maximise rapport and that sense of Ambassadors being someone “like me.” At Griffith University, the mentor application process for mentors asks them to nominate their high school attended, so wherever possible those students engaged as mentors are delivering the program at their former high school. They are often recognisable (by students and staff) and relate well to specific school contexts, which contributes to their effectiveness as positive role models. The success of this approach can be seen in responses such as: “The people were friendly, it felt like I had known people even though I just met them,” and “My mentor she was so informative and nice and really genuine and unique” (GU, 2014c, p. 5).

“It was really cool that we got to walk around the university with our helpers (mentors). They were the same people who taught us at school about what you can do at university, but this time they were showing us for real!” (Student, GU, 2014c, p. 4)

Another approach is to focus on the Ambassadors’ discipline of study as part of the matching process, in addition to their similarity in backgrounds to the school students they interact with. This is another way in which personal narratives open up the possibility for challenging entrenched notions, by offering personal counter-examples, in both speech and action, which are seen as trustworthy and relatable. As Gartland (2012, p. 1) points out in the context of current stereotypes about engineering, “student ambassadors can contribute to inspiring young engineers and potentially disrupt and challenge pupils’ gendered, raced and classed trajectories within engineering” just by showing students that they themselves do not fit the stereotype.

This kind of discipline-focused approach has been used successfully at QUT:

“These current university students, who are often from similar backgrounds, talk about their journey to university and how they overcame any barriers they encountered along the way. The hands-on activities which give students age-appropriate discipline-based experiences linked to potential tertiary study areas and career options are also run by Student Ambassadors. Currently, these experiences include a range of activities related to science, engineering, law, business, education, creative industries, and health.

In addition to these on-campus experiences, discipline-based Student Ambassadors visit LSES schools to provide curriculum-connected in-school activities which range in scale from one-off workshops to eight week programs. Student Ambassadors are also involved in school and community events including Science and Engineering Challenge events; Robotics Fun Days; and Health-related Podiatry, Vision Check and Healthy Lunchbox community events.” (QUT, 2012, p.3)

In addition to recruitment and selection of Ambassadors, training is also crucial so that they have a good grasp of how to tell their own stories, in their own voices, when appropriate. They also need to be able to give accurate practical information that school students may wish to know, such as where to find financial assistance and how to go about applying to a university.

Griffith University recently introduced the High 5 initiative for Year 6 students. It has a training program to help mentors link their personal narratives to the principles embedded in the program. In the training, mentors reflect on their own lives and identify situations or challenges they have had to overcome which demonstrate/relate to each of the five career principles which are the core of the program. An important aspect of the mentors’ work in school classrooms is the sharing of their stories with the Year 6 students in order to introduce each High 5 Principle of Career Development, thus providing personal stories which may resonate with students’ own family/life experiences and foster a better understanding and acceptance by the students of life challenges and the evidence that these situations can be overcome.

4.2 Narratives: Ambassador Perceptions

Ambassadors are overwhelmingly positive about the effect their visits have on students, and on the importance of the personal narrative approach.

Griffith University's mentors expressed 100% agreement that "Uni-Reach activities help raise students' higher education aspirations and awareness about university study," and that "Mentors play an important role in assisting students to find their higher education pathway" (GU, 2014c, p. 7).

Similarly, The University of Queensland Ambassadors were also in 100% agreement that "UQ's Widening Participation activities help raise students' higher education aspirations and awareness about tertiary study" and that "Student Ambassadors play an important role in encouraging students to consider uni in the future" (UQ, 2013a, p. 4).

While these measures did not consider the type of engagement activities that were perceived as most valuable by Ambassadors, themes start to become apparent in the open responses.

Queensland University of Technology considered which aspects of the program were perceived as important by Ambassadors, creating a thematic overview of open responses in terms of what school students gained through the Ambassador program, from the Ambassadors' perspective (Table 7).

Themes	Explore Uni Equity Ambassadors (N=45)		Discipline-based Ambassadors (N=42)		All Respondents (N=89)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Personal contact with Student Ambassador role models	31	69	28	67	58	65
Greater understanding of courses/career options	20	44	17	24	41	46
Greater understanding of the uni environment	21	47	13	33	36	40
Motivation/encouragement/inspiration to consider higher education	18	40	16	38	30	34
Dispels myths about uni	6	13	7	17	17	19
Comments related to hands-on/discipline-based activities	2	4	6	14	9	10
No response	4	9	3	7	8	9

Table 7: Ambassador Perceptions: What School Students gain from QUT's WP Activities: Themes from open-ended comments (Green, 2012, p. 12).

This theme of "personal contact" identified in Table 7 is apparent in the open comments from all the universities, and is highly valued by Ambassadors. The following sample of comments focus on what Ambassadors said in particular about the benefits from the personal narrative-based and myth-busting approach that is central to the Queensland Consortium's approach.

"They can see university is possible... because they see that the mentors are ex-students from their school who used to be in a similar position to them." (GU, 2014c, p. 9)

“1) Makes students aware of university and that attendance is realistic for them. Brings the possibility of attending university to the fore of their thinking. 2) Demonstrates that all different kinds of people can attend university. Gives students the opportunity to ask questions that they might not otherwise have the opportunity to ask. Provides some inspiration, particularly to females.” (QUT, 2012)

“Usually when school kids hear information about uni they get a wider picture of what they can study and where they can study. With the ambassadors telling their stories and how they came to where they are today, it gives the students an encouraging push to study. School kids tend to relate more to the ambassadors that are younger than the mature aged ambassadors and also the professors.” (QUT, 2012)

“1) They realise the support system available to them and begin to think they CAN go and do tertiary education. 2) They can relate to the stories of ambassadors and feel like ‘if they can do it, so can I.’” (QUT, 2012)

“Barriers are broken down between university and school and they understand support offered by the government to help them.” (UQ, 2013)

“Giving them a deeper understanding of uni and clarifying any stereotypes they may have heard whilst at school.” (USC, 2014)

“Yes. I noticed that students really enjoyed listening to personal stories about how the student ambassadors found their way into their degree. I think it made them want to be more involved too.” (USC, 2014)

“I have noticed that some students, just from talking through their options and their interests, have developed direction and set goals to achieve their future aspirations.” (USC, 2014)

“I think the student ambassador program is very effective in helping students decide on which pathways to take once they finish high school. It also helps and teaches students that they could get to uni as a mature age student. School students learn there are endless opportunities to keep learning while still taking part in the things you enjoy. It also reminds not just the school students, but even the ambassadors that their plans might not work to get where they want, but that there are other alternatives. It is also a good opportunity for school students to hear from current uni students and hear their stories. Ambassadors’ stories are great as they give encouragement to students.” (JCU, 2014b)

“They meet us, they share their stories with us and we share ours with them, and they experience as much of JCU as they could possibly experience in five days. By the end of the week, they know that university may not be incredibly easy, but that it is an enjoyable place where you will make lifelong friends. That there are so many avenues to get the support that you need, no matter what situation you are in, and that studying is so much easier when you love your degree.” (JCU, 2014c)

4.3 Enriching School Cultures and Fostering Conversations

“The project may be the only time many of these young people have a conversation regarding higher education.” (Teacher, GU, 2014b, p. 5)

The schools taking part in the Ambassador program are also overwhelmingly positive about its effect on their students and community, in large part because of the ways in which it fosters rich

conversations about how to access university, what it's like, and the kinds of study options available.

For many students, conversations with family are central to building aspirations for higher education; however, not all students have the opportunities for these conversations at home.

The importance of the influence of family and friends in the journey to higher education is highlighted in the Gemici et al. (2014) investigation into *The Factors Affecting the Educational and Occupational Aspirations of Young Australians*. They found that family expectations were a key factor in whether students planned to complete Year 12 and attend university, and that peers' higher education plans were also very influential (p. 3). However, access to higher education is still three times more likely for those students from advantaged SES backgrounds (Rissman et al., 2012, p. 1). Rissman et al. point out that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and especially those who are the first in their family to attend university, are less likely to get useful advice from their parents about their expectations, or what to expect at university, or other topics related to accessing higher education (Collier and Morgan, 2008, cited in Rissman et al., 2013, p. 1).

Further, Fadigan and Hamrlich (2004) in their work on women in STEM in America, found that many students are simply not aware of the options available to them, and end up making choices without sufficient information, in large part because they don't know role-models in their chosen field they can talk to (p. 839).

The narrative approach used in the Ambassador program addresses both of these issues. It gives school students contact with people in fields they might be interested in entering themselves, and also gives school students and their teachers a shared experience of talking about higher education as a normal part of school life. In this way, the program fosters conversation between peers during and after the events, as well as with their parents and teachers later on.

Griffith University asked school students if they were likely to talk to parents about the outreach programs they experienced, and the majority indicated they would (Table 8).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
46% (166/362)	35% (122/362)	16% (58/362)	2% (8/362)	1% (5/362)	100%

Table 8: Student Evaluation: I'll probably talk to my parents/caregiver about Uni-Reach. (GU, 2014c, p. 4)

This role of fostering interest in, and conversations about, higher education does not just take place in schools. Student Ambassadors develop wider relationships with the community, in part due to demographic and regional matching, if possible, but also via community involvement. "Student ambassadors are also involved with school and community events including science and engineering challenges; robotics fun days; and health-related podiatry, vision check and healthy lunchbox community events" (QUT, 2013, p. 4).

The student mentors also see the value in this wider form of outreach:

"I enjoyed getting to know the parents. One dad I spoke with absolutely loved the experience. Two mums were talking about going to uni themselves." (Student Mentor, GU, 2014b, p. 4)

"In my opinion this is a fantastic program that empowers young people and increases our universities' presence in the community." (Student Mentor, GU, 2014c, p. 4)

Schools recognise and value the Ambassadors' role in fostering these kinds of conversations about education within the school community, as expressed in their responses to the program:

“[W]e have found it highly beneficial to our young people and have noticed significant change in their conversation and thoughts towards the possibility of them going to university. St Paul’s school has a total enrolment of 262 children. Of these 72% are from ESL backgrounds, 10% identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders and very few have significant conversations with family members about career possibilities or indeed aspirations to higher education. In the three years that we have been associated with LILAL we have watched our young people form very different opinions about the possibilities for their future. They no longer see university as an option for other people or the lucky few but a very real possibility for themselves. This change has taken place through their interaction with the student mentors (many of whom are just like them!!), their visits to the university, the introduction of ‘The Real Game’ program in our school and the integration of our leadership programs with the LILAL process. [...] Many of our young people tell us they have never had conversations like this and their world view has been extended.” (Jon Soroan, email correspondence, St Paul’s School, December 2014)

5. Institutional Factors – The Queensland Consortium

The benchmarks established for youth mentoring (Australian Youth Mentoring Network, 2000, cited in NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2014, p. 9) include:

- recruiting suitable mentors and mentees
- screening and selecting appropriate mentors
- comprehensive orientation and training, and
- ongoing monitoring and support.

The Consortium universities all have an agenda of social inclusion and diversity in their recruitment and training for these programs, which is reflected in the demographic make-up of the Ambassadors. In addition to recruitment and selection, training is an element of the program in which the universities invest considerable resources. Responses to the training programs have also been sought via the Ambassador surveys.

5.1 Recruitment

Recruitment at all universities focused on students from non-traditional backgrounds. While the proportions of students from diverse backgrounds varied from institution to institution, there was considerable overlap in Student Ambassadors who experienced more than one form of social disadvantage.

For instance, at The University of Queensland, the majority of Ambassadors were from non-traditional backgrounds, as shown in Table 9 below. Of these students, 12 (50%) in 2013 and 15 (41.6%) in 2014 identified as having experienced more than one of these factors.

	First person in your immediate family to attend uni	Ethnicity		Refugee	Low income	Regional / rural	Student with a disability	None of the above	All Respondents
		Aboriginal/ Torres Strait Islander	Maori/ Pacific Islander						
2013	14	1	0	2	9	11	0	9	28
2014	17	2	0	0	11	17	1	9	36

Table 9: Backgrounds of Student Ambassadors, The University of Queensland.

A similar trend can be seen at Queensland University of Technology, with 31 (34.8%) students identifying in more than one category in 2012, and 31 (27.8%) in 2013.

	First person in your immediate family to attend uni	Ethnicity		Refugee background	Low income background	Regional / rural background	None of the above	All Respondents
		Aboriginal/ Torres Strait Islander	Maori/ Pacific Islander					
2012	44	5	3	4	42	n/a	31	89
2013	45	5	n/a	n/a	37	24	42	111

Table 10: Backgrounds of Student Ambassadors, Queensland University of Technology.

Eight (21.6%) University of the Sunshine Coast students similarly identified with multiple experiences of disadvantages in 2014.

	First person in your immediate family to attend uni	Ethnicity		Refugee background	Low income background	Student with a disability	None of the above	All Respondents
		Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	Maori/Pacific Islander					
2014	11	6	2	0	11	2	16	37

Table 11: Backgrounds of Student Ambassadors, University of the Sunshine Coast.

Four (19%) James Cook University Student Ambassadors who completed the post-project survey, and seven (10.8%) who completed the training program’s survey experienced more than one of these backgrounds, which is notable, given the limited demographic data available.

		First person in your immediate family to attend uni	Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	English not a first language	None of the above	All Respondents
2014	Ambassador Program	9	2	3	11	21
2014	Training Program	10	25	n/a	36	65

Table 12: Backgrounds of Student Ambassadors, James Cook University.

A similar breakdown isn’t possible for Griffith University’s program, but they recruited with similarly diverse results, as can be seen in Table 13, which is used to monitor alignment of mentors with local community demographics. Griffith also focuses on matching mentors to their former secondary schools.

Mentors’ Cultural Backgrounds (n=416)	
Australian	32.49%
Maori	16.82%
Samoan	10.14%
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	8.29%
Asian	6.22%
African	5.07%
Tongan	3.92%
Cook Islander	3%
Middle Eastern	1.15%
Other	8.76%

Table 13: Backgrounds of Student Mentors, Griffith University 2014.

5.2 Training

Robust training is a key element in any successful program of this type (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2014, p. 9), especially employing young people with limited prior work experience. The large-scale *Evaluation of the NSW Youth Mentoring Program* found that Mentors particularly felt their lack of training when situations became difficult (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2014, p.27).

At Griffith University, 93% of LILAL student Ambassadors felt adequately prepared for their mentor role (2014a, p. 3). They received “generic Student Equity Services mentor training,” followed by more specialised training related to their specific mentoring role (p. 3).

Recent training has focused on role play, in order to address mentors’ anxieties about lack of prior work/life experience. This has been well received by mentors: “I really enjoyed the role play so that we were given an idea of how to present and to receive constructive criticism.”

Griffith University also have a system of senior mentors in place who take a leadership role in training and in program delivery to less experienced mentors, and in opportunities for representing student equity services and its work at key events with staff.

The University of the Sunshine Coast did not evaluate training or follow-up support as part of its program in 2014. One student left a comment anyway, in another area of the survey:

“I think it would have been somewhat easier to have some further insight into how the past sessions have gone. Have a little more tools to offer, I have felt like the program is running with the flow without any further gathering with the mentors.” (USC, 2014)

This suggestion of looking at real examples (particularly as described by experienced Ambassadors) is one that is common across many of the other universities’ surveys.

At The University of Queensland, 100% of students agreed they felt adequately trained and supported for their work as Ambassadors (UQ, 2013, p. 3). However, the written comments indicated that despite the 100% agreement rate, Ambassadors thought there was scope for improvement. In particular, the timing of the facilitation training would be more helpful earlier in the year, instead of mid-year.

“I feel before the program began (especially for newcomers) some form of ‘Learning how to facilitate’ would have been good to ensure we were all going in confidently to our first shifts and we had appropriate presentation skills.” (UQ, 2013, p. 3)

Responses to the final open question, asking how the Student Ambassador program could be improved, evoked several suggestions related to training, informed by the Ambassadors wanting to undertake their duties confidently and to a high standard (UQ, 2013, p. 8):

“I would like to learn more about the cross-cultural communication as many of the students that we encounter on the program are from various and diverse backgrounds.”

“More training and structure around tutoring.”

“More initial facilitation skills training to enhance skills before entering the program.”

“Giving feedback to SAs throughout the year on how they are going with presenting and engaging with the students.”

“Giving the ambassadors some values and principles to operate within and to have these in line with the agenda of the Outreach Program. A training day about the purpose of the Outreach Program, the challenges facing the kids in the areas/schools we work in, and continuing goals.”

“Improving how well the student ambassadors can engage with the students – for example, being very clear that all SAs are to talk with their groups all day on experience days, even on the buses. Future facilitation training is always welcome. Giving everyone a chance at giving presentations.”

In response to the feedback provided by Ambassadors, UQ has implemented the following training and support options for their Student Ambassador Team:

- training at multiple times throughout the year
- provision of a detailed Student Ambassador handbook to all Student Ambassadors
- annual professional development training in communication, presenting and facilitation skills
- regular debriefing and self-reflective practices after each activity/shift
- Cultural Awareness Training delivered by ARTIE (Achieving Results Through Indigenous Education), and
- Voluntary Performance Reviews.

QUT’s review of their Ambassador training indicated that 97% of participants agreed they were satisfied with the training, and 96% were satisfied with the ongoing support (QUT, 2013). QUT also asked an open follow-up question on the adequacy of the training, with the following breakdown of responses (Table 14).

	Explore Uni equity ambassadors (N=52)		Caboolture ambassadors (N=36)		Discipline-based ambassadors (N=63)		All respondents (N=111)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Positive comments	26	50	19	53	30	48	54	49
Request for more frequent training/additional or more detailed content	4	8	4	11	1	2	7	6
Training is no substitute for on-the-job experience	2	4	2	6	2	3	4	4
Negative comments	1	2	1	3	1	2	3	3
No response	23	44	13	36	30	48	50	45

Table 14: Themes from open-ended comments about the Ambassador training (QUT, 2013, p. 32).

The 13% of comments which make requests or criticisms are focused around the frequency and content of training.

“It has been really good. The trainings are very beneficial for the ambassadors. The only thing I would change would be to have 2 trainings maybe at the start and around the middle of the year. This will allow ambassadors to access current information about the changes or upgrades of courses as well updating their understandings and knowledge of QUT. A strong focus on post grad, and returning studying session, in regards to how we advise mature age students in these areas.”

“Training cannot ready you for the variety of events which Student Ambassadors attend. A confidence within oneself is needed for an ambassador’s role – or the want to become more confident within oneself. Role play activities within training sessions would be very helpful :)”

“The formal training about every single course offered by QUT seemed very over-the-top. A general overview of the options would be sufficient rather than a detailed description. Generally you are presenting to students interested in what you are doing rather than the nitty-gritty on some very specific completely unrelated course.” (QUT, 2012)

The positive comments generally focus on the usefulness of the training and follow-up support. This comment is typical in those respects, but also shows a well-developed sense of responsibility for the Ambassador role in the way it suggests additional training:

“We can always grow more. The theoretical support in terms of understandings of faculties/ courses, scholarships and entry pathways is really in depth. The practical training in terms of public speaking and engaging with people is also really helpful. I would love to learn more about how to share stories and break the ice e.g. during lunch breaks at events so we can engage with visitors in that informal setting.” (QUT, 2012)

James Cook University’s review had very similar results to that of QUT. JCU has a one-day workshop for Student Ambassadors, which covers:

- JCU School Engagement team and Get into Uni program (including HEPPP overview)
- Student Ambassador Program including roles, responsibilities and professional expectations
- Cultural Awareness Training
- Effective ways to engage young people
- Working with Children Guidelines
- JCU Employment process and Code of Conduct, and
- Social Media Policy.

This program was reviewed in its own right, with 65 responses from Townsville and Cairns participants. The majority of students indicated that the training had clarified their role (95.3%), and that it was adequate in length (92.3%), relevant and useful (95.3%), and enjoyable (92%).

However, open questions revealed concerns that the training did not provide all the information needed for some Ambassadors (JCU, 2014a):

“It did for the most part, I just felt that as an international student, it would have been helpful to learn some of the grade school/college application terminology.”

“I think there could have been some time spent actually demonstrating to the ambassadors what the role involved.”

When asked to specify the aspects they liked or disliked about the training, 18 responded (27.7%), and all the responses had positive elements. Eight Ambassadors specifically mentioned that working with the other Ambassadors was a highlight. One suggested that more cultural awareness training was needed, along with a chance to hear more about the facilitators’ experiences as Ambassadors, and how they dealt with difficult situations:

“I like the personable and funny ways in which it was presented however I would've liked more cultural awareness training. Perhaps some more insights from the presenters regarding their personal experiences from the program, including the difficult questions they might have been asked and how they reacted. I liked the prezi and the group brainstorming was a great way to meet the other ambassadors.”

Twenty-seven (41.5%) participants responded when asked for suggestions on how to improve the training sessions. Of these, 14 offered substantive suggestions, the most popular being for more hands-on activities (8 responses). Other suggestions included:

- a chance to interact more with the other mentors (3)
- more information on intercultural communication (2), and
- less time spent on online protocols (1).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Queensland Consortium's Student Ambassador strategy is consistently achieving the outcomes benchmarked in the relevant literature. Using the Social Ecological Model (Figure 1) as a lens for investigation, it is apparent that the programs being deployed are successful on many levels. The Ambassadors themselves report high satisfaction across a variety of measures. The school communities they visit are recognisably enriched. The partner universities are helping the student Ambassadors develop new skills and capacities. Social inclusion is being promoted at the individual, school and university levels.

6.1 Individual Factors

Ambassadors are motivated in three main ways:

1. giving to others
2. personal gain (e.g. skills and employment), and
3. promoting education to others, particularly in their discipline (QUT, 2013, p. 7).

Student Ambassadors tend to express all three of these motivations in different proportions, depending on their home institution and personal characteristics. Across all the institutions, there seems to be a correlation between a student's background and what motivates them to become an Ambassador. Those from non-traditional backgrounds, especially those likely to have experienced social disadvantage, are more likely to be motivated by a desire to give to others, particularly to contribute to the lives of younger equity students, or contribute to the community. In contrast, those from more traditional backgrounds are more likely to express motives focused around personal gain, while still wanting to contribute in other ways.

The program is specifically designed to benefit students from low SES backgrounds, providing paid employment with a schedule flexible enough to complement their own studies.

Ambassadors are satisfied with their experiences in the program. Satisfaction is related to both affective experiences, such as giving to others, making connections, and helping people with their careers, and personal gain, in terms of building this capacity for helping others, skills development, gaining recognition for their work, and developing self-respect.

The majority of participants perceive that they had developed graduate capabilities due to their participation in the program, particularly those capacities related to personal growth and social skills. Ambassadors consider themselves more self-confident, and better at communication, team work, and leadership due to their participation. Ambassadors are slightly less confident of capacities which are more complex or wider in scope, such as cultural competence, social responsibility, and linking discipline knowledge to everyday situations. This is not a failure of the program, but rather highlights that these are attributes connected more strongly to lifelong learning.

6.2 Family/School/Community

The student Ambassadors perceive a significant effect on the students they talk to, particularly via the stories they share.

One of the most valuable assets Ambassadors bring to the program is their own lived experience of university and their pathway in accessing it, in the form of the stories they can share about those experiences. This expert knowledge helps bridge the gaps between school students and higher education, and de-bunk misconceptions held by school students, particularly those stereotypes about who can go on to university and what they can study once there.

Ambassadors are matched to the schools and communities they visit, so that their narratives are targeted at the audience and therefore more powerful to those students they talk to. Further, the Ambassador program gives school students contact with someone from a discipline they may be interested in, which they might not otherwise experience.

Beyond the school students themselves, the program fosters conversation within the school community about the possibilities and benefits of higher education, especially between students, teachers and parents. These outcomes are recognised and valued by school staff.

6.3 Higher Education Institutions

The Consortium universities have a recruitment strategy focused on encouraging the participation of students from diverse backgrounds, resulting in significant diversity in the Student Ambassadors.

While many of the Consortium programs do use demographic matching, this is complemented by other strategies to ensure that Ambassadors and school students have additional commonalities in order to maximise rapport and that sense of Ambassadors being someone “like me.” In some programs, such as Griffith University’s, mentors are sent to the high school they attended, where possible. In others, Ambassadors and students will have a similar discipline interest. This is another way of encouraging the myth-busting aspect of the program, as Ambassadors are living role models who counter stereotypes just by being visible in their discipline.

Ambassadors expressed a high level of satisfaction with training they received as part of the program, and the follow-up support while they were working. Training varies across the Consortium’s programs, but tends to be multi-focused: developing basic facilitation and presentation skills, providing information students will need, and workshopping the personal narratives Ambassadors are likely to share.

While the Ambassadors expressed a high level of overall satisfaction with the training and support provided, open comments indicate there are some remaining gaps including a desire for more hands-on exercises, more contact with experienced Ambassadors, and more support materials about how processes work at universities. Some of these suggestions have already been addressed as part of the ongoing review process embedded in the programs.

6.4 Policy Implications

There is a well-established body of literature within the UK and Australia which shows that using university students as ambassadors to schools is an effective widening participation activity. It helps overcome stereotypes about higher education, and provides role models and trustworthy narratives which help foster a change in student beliefs about attending university (Gale et al., 2010).

The Queensland Consortium focused their program around this kind of narrative strategy, in addition to matching ambassadors to schools in order to maximise the chances for positive change. Just as importantly, the program seeks to enhance the skills and capabilities of the Ambassadors themselves.

The Consortium agreed to undertake this program in a devolved way, with each university responsible for enacting the agreed joint elements. This approach has generally worked well, although it does have one disadvantage which impacts on the comparability of the different programs. The use of different assessment instruments at each university means that the Consortium cannot easily compare their findings, especially as instruments vary not only in their wording, length, and the dimensions of the program covered, but when and how often these instruments are deployed within the Ambassador’s journey. Data collection which has some major inputs in common would enable better comparison across the universities, but also more clearly demonstrate the significant strengths in the program as a whole.

A related issue is that there is currently no common instrument for measuring the schools’ perceptions of the program, and the impacts Ambassadors have on students and the school community more widely. This would also be useful information to collect going forward.

This report has focused on the effect of the program on the Student Ambassadors themselves. The evidence provided by Ambassadors shows that the Consortium’s program is successful across all the major measures used at each of the Consortium universities. The Ambassadors and mentors

expressed a high level of satisfaction with their role, and with their training and support. The program provided study-friendly employment, and enabled the development of graduate capabilities. Ambassadors perceive a strong positive effect on the school students they interact with. Schools are also satisfied with the program, particularly in the way it fosters conversations about higher education within the school community.

In view of the findings, the following recommendations can be made for the Consortium's Ambassador strategy:

6.5 The Survey Instrument

At present, there is little consistency between the survey instruments used by the different universities. Greater consistency in key questions would enable a larger sample size of respondents, and more accurate comparison of data points.

- Continue to collect survey data from the Student Ambassadors after programs, and after training sessions.
- Collaborate on several common questions relating to demographic information, equity backgrounds, motivation, satisfaction with their roles, development of graduate attributes, and satisfaction with training and support.
- Collect information from schools about their perceptions of the program and the impact of Ambassadors.

6.6 Training and Development

While students enjoyed training sessions and thought them useful, they also expressed a need for additional training and support.

- Offer additional ongoing training and support, particularly focused on practical exercises and better access to information about the program and the university.
- Provide additional opportunities for collegial sharing of experience between Ambassadors, especially those with experience.

7. Key Findings

This report considers the university-led Student Ambassador programs undertaken by Queensland's Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium, in which university students are involved in outreach into local schools. It synthesises the findings of five university's programs: Griffith University, James Cook University, Queensland University of Technology, The University of Queensland, and the University of the Sunshine Coast. The focus is on the Ambassadors themselves – their motivations to take part in, and satisfaction with, the program; their perceived development of Graduate Attributes during the program; their demographics, recruitment and training; their perceived impact on the school students they work with; and the schools' perspectives on the contributions made by Ambassadors.

Motivation

Students tended to be motivated to join the program by: giving to others, personal gain, and/or promoting education. There is a correlation in the survey data between a student's background and their motivation for being an Ambassador. Student Ambassadors from equity backgrounds were more likely to be motivated by wanting to positively contribute to the lives of younger equity students, or contribute to the community. In contrast, those from non-equity backgrounds were more likely to be motivated by gaining skills and experience.

Satisfaction

Ambassadors were highly satisfied with their experiences working with the program, particularly in terms of helping others and personal development.

Graduate Attributes

The majority of students perceive that the program helped them develop professional skills related to their university's graduate attributes.

Confidence was one of the most commonly perceived gains. While a significant number of students reported that they have developed a greater appreciation for the challenges faced by those experiencing various forms of social inequality, this capability tended to be more lowly ranked than the others.

Narratives

Ambassadors are ideally placed to bridge the gaps between institutions and individuals, and to challenge pre-conceived notions about who can attend university. Ambassadors' personal narratives can be a "hot" source of information, which students can perceive as more trustworthy than more formal sources.

School Cultures and Conversations

Schools recognise the value of ambassador programs, not only in providing role models from particular disciplines to the school students directly involved, but in fostering conversations about higher education between students, parents and teachers.

Recruitment

Recruitment is focused on students from diverse backgrounds, resulting in significant diversity in the Student Ambassadors. There was considerable overlap in Student Ambassadors who experienced more than one form of social disadvantage.

Training

The majority of students expressed satisfaction with the training and support provided.

There are some gaps and anxieties related to training and support that Ambassadors are experiencing, including a desire for more hands-on exercises, more support materials, and more time to engage with experienced Ambassadors.

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